# A little help from their friends

The first change Sal and Cindy had to make to their dream restaurant was the clunky name. Even before opening, people hearing about Scarborough Fair Café at the Louisville Antique Mall would go, "Huh?" It opened in September 1996 as the less tongue-twisting "The Café at the Louisville Antique Mall."

If the connection with the Antique Mall scuttled the name of Sal and Cindy's dream restaurant, they were literally surrounded by the part of the dream that involved mismatched vintage furnishings. And the logo on the menu featured a drawing of a carousel horse from the descriptions of Scarborough Fair they had talked about in college. White tablecloths with glass tops added a formal touch, and empty cobalt-blue AriZona iced tea bottles made inexpensive flower vases. The banks of fluorescent lights on the ceiling didn't create the kind of mood you want for a restaurant, and there was no budget for lighting. So Sal asked the Antique Mall if he could use some of the light fixtures from the vendor booths. Sure, they said, as long as you keep the price tags on.

"I went into these random booths pulling out lights and putting them in The Café, hooking them up with extension cords. They were for sale, even though people would have to wait until the end of the day to pick them up because you couldn't unhook them with a customer sitting there."

The Café had plenty of wide-open space on the second floor, but Sal and Cindy knew they had to start small, six tables and twelve chairs. It was just the two of them after all, plus eight-month-old Alex. They set up a portable crib in the kitchen, which was small, with just the bare cooking essentials: a four-burner electric stove and oven no fancier than the one in your own home, a small refrigerator, and a steam-jacketed kettle to make soups and sauces without scorching.

With such a simple kitchen, the recipes Cindy brought over from the dishes she developed at Sweet Basil had to be simple and efficient—"menu utilization" they called it back in culinary school. That meant using the same ingredients for different items. The chicken breast in the chicken sandwich was the same one that got diced and mixed with mayonnaise for chicken salad. Spreads made ahead of time helped produce a sandwich quickly. It also had to be good enough to keep people coming back to the restaurant, and telling their friends about it. Cindy combined her love of what she calls comfort foods with her experience of culinary quality, and her sense of combining flavors, along with a phrase her father would repeat from his reading of restaurant trade magazines: the eye eats first.

"All we had to work with were sandwiches and salads. We weren't going to do sauces and decorating the plate, but you can put them together so you can see the layers and the colors and textures. When you build a sandwich, the eye says, 'mmmm this looks like it's going to taste good.' Then when you bite into it, it does taste good because the bread is fresh, the bacon is crisp, the tomato is red, the lettuce is crisp—it's like a piece of artwork. You put the right colors and textures all together in one bite, and it's a flavor explosion."

They named the sandwiches for the periods of the antiques around them: The Early American (roast beef); The French Provincial (turkey and roast beef); The Renaissance (salami and ham); The Queen Anne (benedictine.)

The Rubinos had been going to St. Paul church for a year and had joined a Sunday school group. It was not the kind of group they were used to.

Clark had started Boy Scouts at St. Paul and needed a pair of hiking socks for a camping trip. "A brand new pair of those showed up inside our front door one day," says Cindy. "Little things like that would happen all the time. I didn't know people cared for one another like that. It was a new way of living.

"There were these deep personal connections. People were just baring their soul and it was like, wow, it was really a huge awakening for us. We hadn't been there long, I felt like you had to earn your way, but this was happening right away. They didn't know if we were good people or bad people. They didn't question why we were Catholic and now we were going to a Methodist church. They didn't question anything. We'd look out on Sunday mornings at The Café and there would be our whole Sunday school class at a long table in the dining room.

When she tells that story more than twenty years later her voice still rises in amazement and her eyes squint and her brow furrows in puzzlement.

They'd all decided to spend their Sunday having lunch at our business? What's that about? That's crazy. We'd never before felt supported that way."

Never again on Sunday

Sunday offered one bright spot during those turbulent times at the new location. While the Café earned about $2,500 a day during the week, the growing Sunday brunch crowd kicked that day's take up to about $3,000.

But son Clark saw a cost to that most profitable day of the week.

Clark grew up watching what long work hours and financial pressures could do to a family. Around the time Sal started looking for restaurant locations to replace the Antique Mall, Clark started talking to his parents about working too hard, about working seven days a week, about not taking off the Sabbath. Clark had traveled to China and South America for projects with different Christian groups, and he would help out at The Café during his trips back home. He made a point to take a Sabbath from work himself, and he wished his parents would take a weekly day off themselves. His reasons were both practical and faith-based.

"The Lord who designed us designed us not to be robots that keep going all the time," Clark says. "We are spiritual individuals that need time to ponder. If you don't organize your week to protect that time, you end up stealing it from other parts of your week, from your relationships with other people. Rest should be a habitual part of your week, not just to avoid burnout, but for your family and for being filled with love for God and his creation."

Clark's Sabbath was Wednesday. When he came home from his travels, the restaurant seemed least busy on Wednesday, and Wednesday was church meeting night. Clark says, "I needed that boundary and it was valuable."

Sal and Cindy's faith and spirituality had been a growing influence on their lives since they had joined St. Paul and been working to repair their marriage. Clark's Christianity seemed in a whole different league, however. If Clark's strictness about keeping his own Sabbath seemed unusual, extending that to the family business sounded risky to the income Sal and Cindy had been so desperately trying to preserve for the past ten years.

Clark was well aware of the importance of getting an income from the restaurant, so he made efforts to choose his words carefully, strategically. He researched and cited other successful faith-based restaurants. He asked his parents to close on Sunday and trust their business to God.

"I told them that I know you don't believe me," he says. "I know you've learned in your business classes and from your experience that this doesn't seem to pencil, but I'm telling you if you do it for the right reasons, not because you want to increase your sales but because you want to improve your spiritual life, improve your relationship with God and your fellow human beings, then you'll close on Sundays and you'll trust in the Lord for compensation."

That was a lot to swallow for a couple of restaurant owners trying to keep their business afloat. But Clark persisted.

"He would tell us at the end of the workday. He would tell us on our days off," says Cindy. "He would say, 'You really need to take care of yourselves. You need to take care of your staff. You need to give God the glory for what has happened here and out of that gratitude you will benefit way beyond what you could ever imagine.'

"I'd think, 'That's great theology, but in the real world, it doesn't work like that. How are we going to give up our busiest day?'"

On the other hand, she knew the effects of operating seven days on the family, and the staff.

"How are we going to keep people from quitting as more of them say, 'I want to be off on Sunday, I have this event at my church,'"? she says. "People would take Sunday off, and a Muslim woman who didn't have church on Sunday would feel pressured to work that day. Maybe we should be closed on Monday, give up our least busy day, but these women all wanted to be with their families on Sunday and so did we. We would have loved to have a Sunday of what it would feel like to go to church and then go home. It was huge."

Sal and Cindy started thinking, as Cindy puts it, "Clark can come up with some quirky things. But the more he kept nagging, the more it's like, maybe Clark's right."

Clark quit dropping hints and sat down with Sal one day at the restaurant for a direct conversation.

"I can visualize Clark and me sitting there and him telling me, 'Dad, you really need to honor the Sabbath. You and mom need time off. The only way you're going to get it is if you close one day a week.' I told him, 'I can't afford to close on Sunday,' and he would say, 'God would honor your decision. You just have to have faith.'

"I had it all laid out on a spreadsheet and we still had to fill the seats. I did not have the faith that God was just going to wave his hands and make it all good."

Then Mother's Day happened.

---

In the restaurant business, Mother's Day is Black Friday, a day of income that can make up for a lot of slow days. According to the National Restaurant Association, the top gift for Mom that day is a meal out with the family. Two out of five adults dine out on Mother's Day.

The first Mother's Day at The Café's new location was a relatively small affair. It was still building its business after having opened only about five months earlier, and breakfast had been on the menu less than four months. But by the next Mother's Day, 2009, The Café would be ready to put on a big show.

A special Mother's Day menu had been prepared to appeal especially to moms and to streamline production in the kitchen. It offered a couple of egg dishes, a couple of chicken salad items, a pasta salad, a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for the kids.

"When you're in the restaurant business you always try to figure out the best way to do Mother's Day," says Sal. "Some places do buffets, but we didn't think our menu lent itself to a buffet."

Sal's mathematical seating formula blew up. Cindy's kitchen collapsed.

"We were just onslaughted," says Sal. "It was the ugliest day ever."

The waiting line spilled out the door and around the block. The drug counselors Ron and Pat McKiernan and family waited in line outside, and even longer once they were seated.

"One of my clients was waiting tables there and he walked out and told me it's going to be a while, it's crazy," says Pat. Ron left angry, a legacy of the day that still haunts Sal. One of the servers quit on the spot in frustration.

"We had to pick up comp checks to the point we decided we can't be comping all these checks or we're going to lose our butts," says Sal. "We ended up letting some people pay in spite of the disaster."

Cindy calls it a "total fail. The kitchen crashed."

"We took too many reservations and we had people walking in and we put them on the books," she says. "We couldn't even execute the smaller menu because we had no practice. Our spirits were broken. Our kitchen was in disillusionment. This was a total fail and they knew how bad it was. We were supposed to do Mother's Day as a restaurant because it's the busiest day of the year. It's your best day. But not for us."

When the last customer left that day, Clark asked his mom what she wanted for her Mother's Day.

Across the river in Indiana there's a small family-favorite burger-and-ice-cream stand along a state road, called Polly's Freeze.

"It was a day of hell. I said, 'I just want to go to Polly's Freeze and sit outside, not in a restaurant. I don't want to be around servers and dishes, just go sit out on a picnic table and have a burger and ice cream,' and that's what we did. It was raining. We were all getting wet, but we didn't care. We were together."

It was The Café's best income day yet, bringing in $6,000, even with all the comped meals. But Cindy said, "Never again."

Clark says, "It was as if the Holy Spirit let it get so bad that they hadn't submitted their business to the Lord that he let them fall to the rock bottom when it came to their energy level and what it was doing to our family."

Sal says, "It was a financially great day, but it was so negative on our hearts, and that was more

important to us than the cash. We decided that since something like 80 percent of our employees were mothers, we're like, 'What are we doing?'"

It was The Café's last Mother's Day, and Sal would spend the next 18 months figuring out how to close on Sundays while still earning enough money to stay open the rest of the week.